The Early Twentieth Century Farm

BY

Donald Keller

The Early Twentieth Century Farm

Contents

1. Early Twentieth Century Houses
2. Sleeping at Night
3. Work on the Farm
4. Wash Day
5. Seasonal Work on the Farm
6. Butchering Day
7. Outhouses and Disease
8. Death, Funerals, Widows and Orphans
9. The Influenza Epidemic
10. The Survivors
11. The Early Automobiles
12. Improved Earth or Dirt Roads
13. Trees Helped People to Keep Cool
14. Fun and Pleasure in the Shade of the Trees
15. The Demise of the Odon Picnic
16. Renewed Appreciation of Trees

Early Twentieth Century Houses

The date that I started writing this is December 2, 1993. I was born near the beginning if the twentieth century on November 4, 1902. The twentieth century started On January 1, 1901, and it will end the last day of December 2001 a few days more than eight years from the present date. What the twenty first century will bring to the human race no one knows but it is well known what the twentieth century has brought except for the remaining eight years. Yet it is not well known what happened to me during my living over ninety years during the twentieth century. What I saw with my own eyes, felt and experienced only represents a tiny fraction of the possible experiences that one could have during this ever changing and complex century.

I was not born in a log cabin, but in a log house. There were two rooms downstairs and two rooms upstairs. There were only a few log houses in the area where I was born. My parents were not satisfied with the four room log house wit the huge fireplace in the living room. Therefore they had two additional rooms constructed of sawed lumber. A kitchen and dining room were added to one side of the log house before I was born. A porch the length of the house wit a roof over it was added to the opposite side of the house.

When I was about seven or eight years old, a frame house was purchased and moved on wooden rollers by means of horse power to a site near the log house. The log house was torn down; also torn down was a log barn after a much larger frame barn was built of sawed lumber. I can't remember anything that was wrong with the log house; it was just as comfortable as the frame house. It was said that log houses were cooler in summer and easier to heat in the cold winter months. This seemed to me to be true.

Very few of the frame or log houses had fireplaces and only a few of those were used for heating the living room in the cold winter months. A large iron stove was almost always used. A door could be opened in the front of the stove and coal or wood could be placed in the iron fire box. A piece of iron could be attached to the fire box from outside the stove. By moving this piece of iron the fire box could be moved so that the ashes accumulated I the fire box could fall into the ash pan below. The ash pan had to be carried outside the house and dumped somewhere. The empty pan was then inserted in the stove below the fire box. Furnaces which would heat the house by means of hot air heat pipes were unheard of. A black pipe led from the stove to the chimney. Gases and smoke were then vented to the chimney and outside the house. Sometimes the tar collected in the stove pipe and chimneys would ignite or catch on fire. There were rooms in each house that were not heated by the living room stove or the kitchen stove. People slept in cold rooms. At night fires in the stove would die down because no one was awake to replenish them with fuel. It was not uncommon for ice to form on a bucket of water in the kitchen during the winter months.

When fireplaces were used for the heating and cooking, bathing was uncommon. With the introduction of the big iron cook stove, bathers could find some privacy and warmth while bathing behind the big cook stove. Children could bathe in a big steel wash tub. Adults being too big to sit in a wash tub bathed with a wet and warm wash cloth. On one side of the kitchen stove there was a tank filled with water which was warmed by the adjacent fire.

When wood was used for eating and cooking, trees both large and small were cut down and moved to a place near the house. Tree trunks had to be cut into lengths convenient for use in the iron stoves or fireplace. Tree trunks and limbs too large in circumference for convenient use had to be split into pieces with an ax. Large piles of wood could sometimes be seen near a house. Also to be seen were small pieces of wood called wood chips which were produced when a piece of wood was cut into two pieces by the wood chopper with the sharp steel ax blade. These wood chips were collected and used for fuel for starting a fire. Anything used for starting a fire was called kindling. Kindling would ignite easier than other material. Kerosene was sometimes used to start a fire but this was hazardous. Sometimes to keep fuel dry, coal or wood was stored in a one room structure called the wood shed.

There were very few basements under houses during the early twentieth century. When there was a basement it was only a dark damp dingy hole with floor and side walls of earth. There were no windows for light and ventilation. There was no artificial lighting. Apples and canned fruit were stored in the basement.

Concrete floors and sidewalls, windows and hot air furnaces appeared later in the century. With the hot air furnaces with heat pipes extending to all the rooms of a house the whole house could be made comfortable.

Sleeping at Night

During the spring, summer and autumn months people usually slept between two white linen sheets. When the nights were cool usually a beautiful hand made quilt was pulled up over the white sheet for added comfort. White linen sheets were not used during the cold winter months. Cotton blankets were used to conserve more heat. Thick woolen blankets supplied much comfort. Two layers of cotton cloth with cotton filling or other kinds of filling between them were called comforts or comforters. Many people wore long flannel gowns while in bed.

There were no bathrooms in rural areas or even in many towns and cities. There were little buildings called privies or outhouses to which people went to deposit the secretions or wastes of the human body. People did not go to an outhouse during a cold winter night. Under each bed was a container or pot sometimes called a commode. If used the pot or commode had to be emptied and washed when morning came. This was not a desirable job. Bathrooms were considered undesirable for many years. People were slow to adjust to the idea of using a room in the house for the deposit of body secretions. In towns, houses were usually built on small lots. Therefore the outhouse which attracted a multitude of house flies had to be building very close to the house. An undesirable smell came from the outhouse.

Keeping warm in bed at night on a cold winter night was not easy. It required some planning, preparation and supplies. A large bag called a feather tick and shaped to fit the bed was filled with goose feathers. Goose feathers were fluffy, soft, comfortable and warm. There were sometimes two goose feather mattresses on one bed. To secure a goose feather mattress geese were raised on the farm. To pluck the feathers from a goose the goose had to be caught. One person held the legs and neck of the goose while the other held the wings together with one hand (so they would not flop and bang into the face and arms) and pluck the feathers from the goose with the other hand. Of course the goose gyrated, moved about, squawked and tried to escape of get away probably because of the pain inflicted by the pulling of the feathers out of the goose's flesh.

Some people had mattresses filled with wheat straw. After one winter of use the wheat straws would be broken up and matted together so much so that the wheat straw mattresses could be hard, lumpy and uncomfortable. The old straw had to be dumped and replaced with fresh new recently threshed wheat straw.

Work on the Farm

The house wife was very busy. When a baby was born much work was created. The child was usually nursed but sometimes the mother worked so hard that she did not produce enough milk for the baby. Cow's milk was used but it had to be heated in a bottle to sterilize it. The baby needed clean diapers frequently. Sometimes at night the baby needed attention. A cradle was made by hand or purchased. Sometimes a baby was rocked to sleep by rocking the cradle back and forth. The baby needed frequent bathing and clothing had to be changed frequently and washed. The work did not seem hard because the baby was cute. Just watching the antics of a baby provided much needed entertainment. A few people said that they would not accept a million dollars for the baby but they would not give a dime for another one.

In a few years the baby grew up and became a great asset on the farm. The girls helped cook, wash, make clothing, churn the butter, wash the dishes, place kerosene in the lamps, trim lamp wicks and clean lamp chimneys, scrub floors, sweep the floors and dust furniture.

As boys grew up they were introduced gradually to work much different from the girl's work. A boy brought inside the house coal or wood for the cooking and heating and heating well water for cooking, drinking, and cleaning. He carried out of the house the ashes from the stoves, garbage, and used dish water.

A boy would gather the eggs from the chicken house, milk cows, and feed and water the livestock which consisted of horses, cows, hogs and chickens. He would sometimes be called upon to help scoop the manure out of the chicken house and the horse and cow stables. He was called on to drive the cows in from the pasture to be milked and then return to the field. He was called upon to help chop down weeds, work in the garden, and to move the churn dasher up and down to cause butter to separate from cream. A boy helped peel apples and other fruit in preparation for caning, helped throw hay onto the farm wagon and to throw it off into the barn loft. He helped to shock the wheat which work consisted of carry8ng the bundles of wheat to one place and building a neat stack of them. A boy was not called on to kill the hogs on butchering day or kill chickens by placing one foot on the chicken's neck and pulling hard on the chicken's legs. He was not asked to pull the feathers off the chicken after placing the dead chicken in a bucket of hot scalding water. Neither was he asked to take the entrals or insides out of chickens. No wonder that fried chicken tasted so good to him. He was not asked to do cooking, scrub or sweep the floors, wash the dishes, sew with needle and thread, or make the beds. Neither was he asked to start the fires in the stoves if they went out nor was he asked to blacken the stoves to keep them from looking unsightly or ugly. I was not asked to hang the newly washed clothes on the wire or rope line so that they would dry nor was I asked to iron clothing. When I worked for neighboring farmers or earned money in any other way I was not asked to give any of it to my parents. The money was mine to spend as I wished to spend it.

Wash Day

Monday was usually selected as wash day on the farm. Sometimes the housewife was tired on Monday if she had had a houseful of company on Sunday. Even if she had not had company to cook for she had to cook on Sunday more than during the days of the week because it was customary to have more and better food to eat on Sunday.

During the very earliest part of the twentieth century washing clothing was very hard or difficult. Two pieces of wood with a corrugated piece of metal fastened between them was placed in the wash tub and leaned against one edge of the tub. The tub was elevated a foot or more by placing it on a chair seat or on a table. The person doing the washing placed the clothing in the tub and poured hot water over the clothing. Clothing was held in the hands and rubbed up and down on the corrugated piece of metal to get it clean. Soap was used to help clean the clothing and make the work easier. Much energy was needed as the housewife leaned over the tub partly filled with hot water and clothing. On a hot day the hot water only added to the heat problem. Sore muscles, aching backs and exhaustion were common complaints on wash day.

To make the work on the wash board easier, clothing was sometimes boiled on the cook stove in the winter time and in a big iron kettle outside the house during the hot summer months.

Before long there was relief and some help for the housewife. A mechanical washing machine was invented and introduced. A wooden tub was supported by wooden legs. When a wooden handle was moved back and forth a wheel underneath the washing machine went around and around. The wheel moved a cog which in turn moved a disc inside the tub with spokes or wooden fingers of wood to move back and forth, which moved the clothing and also caused the water to swirl around the clothing with a cleaning action.

Moving the handle back and forth to move the mechanism was much easier than bending over a wash tub and moving clothing up and down by hand over a corrugated piece of metal. Also the hands did not need to be in hot water and the skin of the hands did not become wrinkled. Later when electricity became available, there was much less work on wash day. With electric and gas driers clothing did not need to be taken outside the house and hung on a wire or rope to dry. Women became overjoyed with the possession of a new-fangled gadget. No one else can blame them for they were truly emancipated on wash day. For a woman with eight or ten children the electric washing machine was truly a blessing from above. Possibly the short lives of so many women in the days of the wash board was due to wash day.

With the discovery of a method of making soap, people could decrease the difficulty of washing and keep themselves clean and in better health.

To make soap from animal fat and wood ashes, water was poured over the ashes. Liquid which drained from the ashes was called lye. The lye was poured into a kettle or some other kind of container along with animal fat. Beneath the container a wood fire was built. After cooking and stirring the mass for a day, the soap would rise to the top of the container. The soap was taken out of the top of the container and allowed to cool so that it would harden. After hardening, the soap was cut into squares or rectangular pieces to make it convenient to use.

Seasonal Work on the Farm

On one of the first nice spring days of weather on the early 20th century farm the housewife declared a special day for cleaning the house called house cleaning day. First the doors and windows were opened to do what was called "airing out" the house. In this manner the germs accumulated during the winter months were supposed to be disposed of. Carpets were taken off the floors, taken outside, hung on clothes lines and beaten with paddles. With every swing of a wooden paddle, dust would rise from the carpet and float away on the gentle spring breezes. The carpet had been swept with a corn broom during the winter months. The dust generated in this manner would rise for all to breathe. People would sometimes leave the room to escape from the rising dust. There were no vacuum sweepers but there was a sweeper moved by hand, the wheels of which turned a brush on the inside. A container caught some of the dust. Even if there had been an electric sweeper, there would have been no electricity to operate it. Floors covered with linoleum were mopped and even wooden floors with no coverings were scrubbed.

The heating stove along with the black stove pipe was removed and stored in a pantry or closet where it would not be visible. No one wanted to see an ugly big black heating stove during the hot summer months. A circular metal covering was placed over the hole in the chimney where the stove pipe formerly connected with the chimney.

Lace curtains were taken off the windows and washed. To get the wrinkles out of the clean curtains they were placed in a wooden frame and stretched. This was called a curtain stretcher.

Wheat was harvested by a machine called a binder which would cut the wheat and bind it into bundles. Hay was raked into long piles by a machine with long curved steel blades. Tractors were unheard of. Corn was plowed by a cultivator which would plow only one row at a time. A swath of hay about five feet wide was cut by a steel blade which moved back and forth very rapidly. The corn plowing season, the hay harvesting season, and the wheat harvesting season sometimes came at about the same time or sometimes overlapped one another so that frequently there were several jobs which needed to be done at the same time. Sometimes a farmer would overwork himself and his horses. Horses might have sores on their shoulders where the horse collar exerted great pressure on the horse flesh as the horses pulled plows, cultivators, wagons and other farm machines. No matter how much work needed to be done on the fields, all work stopped on Sunday. Without this day of rest, I believe some farmers would have had health problems at least more than they already had. Stiff legs and aching backs were common complaints. Many farmers were too tired to go to church on Sunday.

The season for canning fruits and vegetables extended from the summer time until the fall of the year when peaches, pears, grapes and apples were canned and preserved for winter use.

Winter time was a slack season of work for the farmer unless he had a cut over forest to clear for farming. During the winter the livestock had to be fed and watered; cows had to be milked. Fuel had to be brought for the stoves; ashes had to be taken outside and disposed of. Fires in the stove had to be replenished with fuel. Shopping needed to be done for needed supplies; livestock, eggs and butter needed to be transported to town and sold. If coal was used for fuel, trips had to be made to the local coal mine. The coal had to be loaded onto a wagon and unloaded.

A wagon full of corn, wheat or oats might be sold at the local market. It was not easy to load hogs into a wagon. To load hogs the back and gate had to be taken off the wagon. Then a piece of wood about as long as the door of a house but several inches wider was put in place; one end of which rested on the ground, the other end of which extended to the bed of the wagon. Cleats or crosspieces of wood were fastened onto the inclined plane so that animals would not slip and slide back to the ground while walking up the inclined plane. The hogs did not want to climb this wide strip of wood and go into the wagon. Several people with paddles and switches in their hands would surround the animals, shout at them and hit them if necessary to get them to go into the wagon.

Pigs were born in the spring season of the year. If fed well they might be large enough to be butchered the following fall or winter. Sometimes a hog was allowed to grow until he was a year and a half to two years old before being butchered. By this time he was big and fat weighing possibly 200 pounds. It was too hot to do butchering in the summer time and too cold for the workers in the cold winter time. A fall or early mild winter day was selected. The meat would not spoil in cool weather and it would not freeze solid if the temperature was above freezing.

Calves were born in the spring season. Also horses called colts were born then. Chickens laid the most eggs during the spring seasons and eggs were hatched during the spring of the year. Winter was the season for coughs, colds and the flu.

Heavy thick underwear was worn during the winter months. Thin cotton cloth was worn in warm weather, but it was not nearly so thin or cool as is much of the new cloth manufactured and used for clothing today. Thick caps with a lining that could be pulled down over the ears kept the ears warm. Heavy over-shoes kept the feet warm and dry. There was no air conditioning for the hot summer. People tried to keep cool by swinging a fan back and forth and by resting in the shade of a tree. Hand made ice cream was very popular during the hot weather.

A farmer had to do two things to hogs. The hot had a very bad habit of projecting his short stubby flexible and strong muscular nose into the ground and making big holes in the ground. When the rain came the big holes would become pools of water as much as a foot deep. This pleased the hog very much. He would lie down in the pool of water and turn over and over, first on one side then on the other side, always keeping his nose and snout out of the water. He would in this manner cool himself off in hot weather. The hog had no sweat glands to help in the cooling process. The mud would dry out on the body of the hog and become very hard. This helped the hog because insects could not bite through this hard layer of dried mud and penetrate the tender skin.

To keep the hogs from making all of these undesirable holes, the farmer clamped pieces of metal in the hog's nose so that rooting in the earth would become painful. One farmer would sit on a young hog and hold it between his legs. With one hand he would hold the hog's ears to keep it from moving the head back and forth. With the other hand the farmer had an instrument with a sharp metal ringlet. When he closed the handle of the instrument, the sharp rind would penetrate the hog's snout and close so tight that it would not come loose or come off.

On the rear end of a male hog just below the tail and between the legs were body parts called testicles which are necessary for the act of reproduction. This organ according to what the farmers said caused male hogs to fatten less rapidly. With a sharp knife the farmer would make incisions and cut out or remove these organs. This job was not easy and it was skilled and dangerous work. Doing this work was called castration. A farmer almost always needed help to do this work.

Oats and corn were sown and planted early in the spring. Sometimes the spring weather was cold and windy so the farmer endured much discomfort. Corn was plowed three or four times by a two horse riding cultivator to loosen the soil for the growing roots and to keep down the weeds.

Wheat and hay were harvested during the hot summer months. The farmer wore a huge straw hot to protect him from the bright and hot rays of sunshine. At intervals he and his horses rested in the shade of the trees.

Fall was the season when the shucks or coverings were pulled off the corn ears. The ears were then broken from the stalk and thrown into a wagon, then stored in a crib for winter use. Sometimes the corn harvest extended into the winter months. The corn was mature before that time but it needed to remain on the cornstalk for awhile and dry out. If the weather was wet the corn might not dry out until December. If the corn contained too much moisture when it was harvested, it would mold in its crib and become unusable. The same was true of hay. Wet hay in a hay mow would generate a lot of heat which would cause spontaneous combustion and cause the barn to burn to the ground. The fall season was the season for harvesting fruit and some of the vegetables. It was therefore the canning season.

During the fall season there was the apple picking season. Ladders were used to pick the apples off the big limbs. A farmer with a large orchard would store apples underground. A round hole would be dug in the earth about six or seven inches deep. The hold would be lined with six or seven inches of wheat straw. This mound would be a foot or two above the general surface of the ground. The apples would seldom freeze and they would be dug out and used when needed during the winter months.

During the winter months the housewife would cut old clothing into long narrow strips. The long strips of cloth would be wound up into a ball about two or three times the size of a baseball. Dozens of these balls of cloth would be taken to a weaver who was a lady with a loom. The wooden shuttles were moved back and forth weaving a beautiful carpet which was used as a floor covering.

Another winter activity was cutting cloth from old clothing into small pieces. These small pieces were then sewed together into one piece several inches in width. These larger pieces were sewed together to form the top of a quilt. Hand made quilts were very much prized for decorating the beds and helping to beautify the entire house. The winter season for the typical house wife was just as busy as the summer season.

Butchering Day

A female hog called a sow gave birth to eight to a dozen or more little pigs each spring. This was called being prolific. On some farms there were small wooden houses called hog houses in which the sow gave birth to all the little pigs. Without the shelter of the little wooden houses some of the pigs would die in severely cold weather.

Mature hogs and the little pigs ate special kinds of food out of a trough made of wood. A board or plank of wood was nailed to the edge of another plank. This formed a v shaped structure. A short plank or wooden board was nailed to each end of the trough. The waste products which originated in the farmer's kitchen such as water left over from washing dishes, food left on the plates, surplus milk, pairings or peelings from fruit, spoiled food, etc. was placed in the trough. Carrying the slop to the pigs in a metal bucket was likely to be the job of a boy. On the bucket handle there was sometimes a piece of wood to protect the hand from the hard rigid piece of metal.

One day in late autumn or early winter was selected as butchering day. On this day hogs were killed and cut up or dissected into pork chops, hams, sausage, spare ribs, etc. to secure enough pork to last the farmer and his family until the next butchering day about one year later.

Sometimes a hog was killed with an ax. Not every man could kill a hog with an ax. A very hard blow had to be struck on the center part of the hog's forehead above the eyes. A man could not afford to miss this spot. If he missed this spot or place the hog would probably not be killed. In this case the infuriated angry animal was sure to attack the man. The wooden ax handle gave the hog killer leverage and made it possible for a fatal blow to be struck.

Not every man could kill a hog with a gun at the first shot. A shot gun had a piece of walnut wood, the stock part of the gun which was in contact with the shoulder when the gun was fired. Walnut wood produced less recoil and vibration on the shoulder than other kinds of wood. Gunpowder used to make a shot gun shell was made partly from charcoal which was made by heating or burning wood with a restricted amount of air.

Wood was very important in the butchering process. A wood fire was started under a big iron kettle filled with water. A wooden platform about four feet wide and nine or ten feet long was constructed and elevated about two feet from the ground. At one end of the platform was a barrel with the open end leaning on the wooden platform at about a thirty degree angle. Boiling hot water was taken from the iron kettle and water was placed in the wooden barrel. A hog which had been killed was placed on the wooden platform in front of the barrel. Two or three men grabbed the hog by the neck and ears and slid it back and forth in the hot water contained in the barrel. After the hog was taken out of the barrel, men with knives began to cut off the hair. Men and sometimes boys grabbed the hair of the hogs and pulled it out of the flesh. The hot scalding water made the hog hair much easier to pull out. The hot flesh and hair of the hog kept the hands warm during the cold weather. Hot water dripped from the hot scalded hog onto the wooden platform where the hog was being stripped of its hair. The heat from the water was appreciated in severely cold weather.

After the hair had been scraped, pulled, and cut off a hog on the platform of wood the hog was hung up on a horizontal pole which was supported or held up by two wooden posts. When the hogs were hung up on the pole by their hind legs their noses almost touched the ground.

The hogs were not hung to the pole by means of cords or ropes but by a piece of wood which extended from one rear leg to the other. A slit was made in each hind leg adjacent to the leg bone and underneath the leg muscles and strong tendons. A piece of wood which was rounded and sharpened on each end was extended through one slit or opening in one leg. The hog was carried to the horizontal pole. The loose end of the piece of wood was extended over the pole to the opposite or other leg of the hog. The end of the piece of wood was then extended through the slit or cut place of the opposite leg. The strong leg tendons held the piece of wood in place so that the hog was firmly fastened and suspended on the pole.

The first job after the hog had been strung on the horizontal pole was to insert a knife deep into the throat of the hog. When the knife was pulled out blood spurted and gushed forth and spilled on the ground where it was absorbed by the porous earth; or if the ground was frozen the blood flowed away in a red stream to some low place where it collected in a pool of blood. Next the head was cut off. The animal was then cut in a deep gash from one end to another and dismembered piece by piece. Pork chops, hams, spare ribs, pigs feet, brains, intestines, etc.

appeared. This work was greasy bloody business which required the knowledge of just where to cut and in what order to make the cuts.

A small wooden house was called the smoke house. Pieces of bacon and ham were suspended on wooden poles in the smoke houses. Piles of hickory wood were placed on the dirt floor. When the wood was ignited and burned, much heat and smoke were accumulated. The meat was in this manner preserved and given a delicious flavor.

The fat portions of the meat were placed in a big iron kettle. The kettle was suspended on a wooden pole outside the house. A wood fire was built under the kettle. The pieces of fat were heated to a high temperature. A wood fire was built under the kettle. The pieces of fat were heated to a high temperature. When the pieces of fat became liquid, the liquid was cooled. The cooled liquid was called lard and was used for cooking. The remains of the pieces of fat were semi hard and crisp. The pieces of former fat were called cracklings. Some poor people would eat cracklings.

The sausage grinder was fastened o a wooden board each end of which was supported by a wooden chair. A man sometimes sat on the board while he turned the handle of the sausage grinder. There was a piece of wood on the handle where the hand was placed to protect the delicate hand from being blistered.

There was a metal spout on the sausage grinder out of which the ground meat spurted. The intestines of the hogs which had been cleaned of their contents were pushed and folded tightly on to this spout. The open end of the intestine was closed and tied at the end of the spout. When the metal handle of the meat grinder was turned, the meat was ground and forced out the metal spout into the awaiting intestine. As part of the intestine was filled with meat more of the intestine slid off the spout to be filled with sausage. People thought nothing of eating these hog guts with their delicious sausage. The hog guts did not impart any taste to the sausage.

The number of animals slaughtered varied from three to about seven or eight depending on the size of the farmer's family. Surplus hogs were loaded in a farm wagon and taken to market.

The first settlers called pioneers started the custom of butchering the hogs each year and the practice continued well into the twentieth century. When automobiles were acquired farmers could easily make frequent fast trips to town and buy fresh meat from the butcher shops. There were probably other reasons why the butchering day on the farm had been discontinued.

Outhouses and Disease

People were often hired to clean out the outhouses and transport the accumulation of unwanted material away. House flies which bred in outhouses carried disease germs to the food in the kitchen and dining room table. There were so many house flies on a cream pie that someone said "Pass the raisin pie."

Screen fly traps and sticky fly paper were used to reduce the number of flies. Rooms were closed or chemical sprays were used. Rooms had to be thoroughly ventilated and aired out before people could go back inside the room. The legs of flies were sticky and loaded with disease germs picked up in outhouses, animal manure and other unsavory places. Living in the early twentieth century was a very hazardous and dangerous time to be alive.

Outhouses presented another serious health hazard. Drainage from the outhouse sometimes seeped into wells from which drinking water was secured.

Typhoid fever was a common disease which was sometimes fatal. Two of my brothers were severely ill with typhoid fever. Both recovered but one of them survived in a much weakened condition. Soon after partial recovery he became infected with TB germs and died a few months later leaving a young wife and baby only a few weeks old. The baby grew to be a young man. He died of TB apparently having been infected by his father when he was a baby. The father held his new born son on his lap and played with him. This should not have been permitted but probably only the mother had the authority to deny a father the right to play and fondle with his baby.

Death, Funerals, Widows and Orphan Children

During the early twentieth century death was very common and it frequently came at an early age. The average length of life at this time was somewhere near forty nine. At death, one or more people would do what was called “laying out.” This consisted of dressing the body in good clothing, combing the hair and a few other things. The undertaker would come to the home and embalm the body and place it in a casket. Friends would then come to view the body at any convenient hour. The body was kept at home until funeral time. At night two friends would come and sit up all night with the deceased. The family of the deceased went to bed to try and get some sleep and rest. Sometimes the funeral was in the home and sometimes the final rites were held in the church. There were no funeral homes during the early twentieth century.

The casket was transported in a vehicle called a hearse which was pulled by two horses. The hearse had glass sides so the casket was visible to all. Six friends of the deceased carried the casket to the hearse and from the hearse to the grave site.

Funerals were much different from the funerals of today. A funeral might last an hour, whereas many of today’s funerals last fifteen minutes or less. Funerals attracted many people. Today’s funerals are not as well attended. Grief was evident at an early funeral because people often cried or shed tears because of the loss of a loved one. In some cases it was the bread winner who was lost to a family. This often resulted in a family living in poverty for the remainder of life. When the father was lost an older boy might have to try and take his father’s place by carrying on the farming operations. When the mother was lost the eldest girl would have to do the house work and take care of the younger children. In one instance three young girls had to bring up a baby brother because the mother died in childbirth. In another instance a girl in her teens had to do the house work and bring up three sisters and a brother. One of the sisters died of TB while in her early teens having no doubt been infected with the TB germs by her mother.

During my grade school and high school years, I was in class with several orphans. I played with them on the playground. I knew two boys each of which had lost both of their parents. They stayed with neighboring farmers. They were self sufficient as they paid for board, room, clothing and school books by working for the farmers. A boy and a girl having lost their father stayed with an aunt and uncle and worked for them on the farm. One was drafted for World War I. He saw active duty and came back alive.

The Influenza Epidemic

The influenza epidemic of 1917-1918 was cruel and devastating. One could not predict when or whether one would contract this disease or whether one would survive if the disease was contracted. It was difficult for the well people to take care of all the sick and especially hard to cope with the loss of loved ones.

Our neighbor about one mile to the south of us lost two sons who were only in their early twenties. Another neighbor who lived about a mile northeast of our family lost two daughters. One was enrolled as a freshman at the local high school and was in my class. When her sister died of the flu she decided to get out of her bed and go into the adjacent room where her sister lay dead. She took one look at her sister, went back to her bed and died instantly within two of three minutes of her sister's death. This must have been a terrible shock for the survivors in the family.

Everybody was afraid of the flu and it was hard to get nursing help. However, my parents hired a nurse to take care of my sister because she was so seriously ill. I had the flu but I felt fine just like when I was well but I was weak. My mother made me go to bed and stay in bed. I begged her to let me get out of bed for several days, but she said "No", until one morning she said "Yes, You may get out of bed and get dressed." How happy I was when I received the good news. When I sat on the side of the bed ready to spring to my feet and shout with joy, I discovered that I was too weak to sit up when I fell back into bed. Two or three days later I tried to get out of bed again. By this time my strength and agility had come back to me and I joyfully and enthusiastically dressed myself in my usual clothing and resumed my usual daily activities.

The Survivors

Many of the families living in the early 20th century had lost one or more members of the family. I lost a brother age 23 who died of T.B. He left a young wife and son. Down the road a short distance to the north lived a widow. She lost both he first and her second husband. She lived with her daughter and her daughter's husband who did the farm work on his mother-in-law's farm. A few steps or yards to the north lived a widow with her son who was probably about 50 years of age. The husband was a Civil War veteran who died young as a result of injuries received while in active service. A short distance farther north a young girl died of T.B. about 1922. Farther on lived a surviving husband, a young girl about 15 and two young sons.

At the top of a hill farther on north there lived a family that had many severe health problems. Three daughters died of T.B. Each daughter had a child and each child died at an early age. This family lived near three outhouses. A nearby school had two outhouses. The family well was nearby. There was no doubt some pollution from the nearby farm yard where much animal manure was deposited. A small stream flowed nearby. Contents of outhouses probably seeped into the stream. Downstream a short distance lived a farmer who had three barns and several cattle and horses. Pollution from the small streams and the barnyard no doubt polluted the well. All the babies born to the farmer and his wife died in infancy except one son who lived in the deceased parents' house. He had one son who had polio and who was crippled all his life.

Along a road which extended west of our house there were several survivors. A man and his wife lived with the wife's mother. The couple had two sons one of which died when he was a young boy. The mother died at an early age leaving her grandmother to do much of the housework which she was not able or capable of doing. She struggled along and did it even though she was weak and frail.

A short distance further on lived a widow with her three daughters. The family survived by renting the farm on which they lived and by raising chickens and vegetables. A short distance from this house were two houses where tragedy had struck each family. At one house lived a widow and daughter. A son had died of T.B. when he was about twenty one years of age. Nearby was a family consisting of four girls, a boy and their father. The eldest girl in her teens did the housework and helped to raise the younger children. Suddenly one of the girls died of T.B. The mother previously died of T.B. while probably only in her forties. About a half mile to the north of this family there lived a widow with three sons and a daughter. I don't know whether the widow owned a farm or not. I heard that the family survived by accepting help from a good friend or neighbor. One man who lived in the area had poor health from early childhood and was never able to do farm work. He lived in a small farm house made from used lumber. He owned three or four acres of land probably inherited from his father and mother. He made a living by raising 30 to 40 hives of honey bees and selling honey. He probably never owned a dress suit or a pair of dress shoes in his life. He lived with his wife and one step daughter. I heard that this man accepted considerable help from a brother who lived nearby.

I have given you a picture of the conditions existing in a small area extending a little over a mile north of my parents' house and over a mile to the west of our house and the area in between those two lines. Most farms were small—40 acres or less and houses were not far apart in this triangular shaped area. I was more familiar with this area than with other nearby areas because this area supplied children to the local school district and I attended church and Sunday school about a mile to the west of our house. Sometimes I attended another church a little over a mile to the north of us. I passed many times almost all the family homes mentioned en route to church, school, or a nearby village. A few children passed away before I was of school age. I knew some of the parents.

Today December 8, 1993, I know of only five survivors of the young people who lived in the area during the early twentieth century. One includes myself. I am hardly able to walk with a cane. Two are in nursing homes. The fourth, the youngest of all is living independently. The three surviving men have each lost a wife. The two surviving women have each lost a husband.

The area that I described has changed much. Many small farms have been combined with much larger units. Many former houses no longer exist. Living in the area there are only a few of the grandchildren of former residents. Many of the children who grew up in the area migrated to far away places. Rural schools have disappeared. Yellow school buses now transport children to consolidated schools. During the early twentieth century there were many dirt roads. Now there are improved hard top roads.

The Early Automobile

I saw my first car when I was about six or seven year old. We saw a cloud of dust rising about a half mile down the road and soon we heard a noise. About ten or fifteen chickens were in the road in front of our house. They did not seem to know what to do. They waited until the car was within a few inches of them; then they fluttered, flew and ran in every direction. One chicken was killed. Some may have been injured. We did not take the time to look under the feathers to see if there were any bruises.

When a car met with a horse driven vehicle there were problems. It was difficult to keep a horse or horses from bolting and running away. Some horse drivers would pull out to the side of the road, get out of the buggy or wagon and take hold of the bridle of the horse to allay his fears and to keep the horse or horses from running away. One man was a small and short man. When he took hold of the horse's bridle the horse reared up on his hind legs several times, each time lifting the man holding tightly onto the bridle a foot or two off the ground bouncing him up and down. In town one large team of horses was so frightened that they ran through a plate glass show window. After awhile the horses became familiar with cars and did not seem to be so frightened. Some car drivers would pull the car out to the side of the road and stop both the car and the motor.

One wheat thrashing crew saw a column of dust rising down the road a mile or more distant. They knew that a car was coming and they wanted very much to see it. They stopped the threshing so that all could watch and see. Just as the car passed them, the car motor backfired a few times making a loud noise. When the dust had cleared away, one man who was on top of a wagon loaded with bundles of wheat was missing; also missing were the wagon and horses. After some time the man on the wheat bundles was found in the top of the tree. When the car backfired with a loud noise, the horses ran away not watching where they were going. The wagon tongue struck the tree trunk causing all to stop suddenly—so suddenly that the man on top of the load of wheat bundles was thrown up into the tree where all lodged among the tree limbs.

I remember seeing an uncle and an aunt after they had ridden in a car for about sixteen miles. I could hardly recognize them because dust was all over their clothing and in the hair so thick that clothing and hair had changed color. Some people wore long loose fitting outer garments called dusters to protect suits and dresses from dust.

During a few years, more and more people bought cars. Travel by horse, buggy, carriage and wagons decreased dramatically not only because people had more automobiles but because people without cars would ride with people who owned cars. Sometimes a car owner would accept pay for a ride to town. Sometimes the ride would be paid for another way. Travel increased dramatically. With the horse transportation a farmer would travel only about two hundred miles per year. Soon he was traveling one thousand or more miles per year visiting friends and relatives in distant places.

I bought a model T car when I was in my teens. A man delivered the car and returned to town in a car which followed him to our house.

A piece of cardboard left on the kitchen table contained instructions on how to start and operate the car. I finally started the car and drove off. No drivers' license was required; neither was a license plate. Many people never learned to drive a car. My sister couldn't learn how to back up. My mother tried driving but shouted, "Whoa" at the car when she wanted it to stop. When the car did not stop she asked me to stop it. We exchanged seats and she never tried to drive a car again. My dad would not even try to drive a car. He simply did not want to drive a car. The younger people seemed to adjust to the use and operation of cars faster than the old people.

There were no self starters and no wide comfortable seats. There were no power brakes or reliable tires. When a tire was punctured there was no spare tire. With a tire repair kit the driver had to fix his own tires. My car had the gasoline tank under the front seat. There was no gasoline gage. If I wanted to know bow much gasoline was left, I had to take the front seat up, unscrew a piece of metal from the gas tank, and insert a piece of wood. How far up the piece of wood was wet indicated the amount of gasoline in the tank. There were no heaters or air conditioning. The battery operated headlights were dim. Thirty-five miles per hour was considered to be high speed.

There is a story or a report about a car driver who drove into town. He saw a big sign erected on which was the word "stop." He stopped, got out of his car and looked around. He saw no reason why the sign was up and drove off wondering why the sign had been erected.

Improved Earth or Dirt Roads

Some of the early roads were smoothed over with a drag or rake.

In the Midwest farmers were helped in their road building by a simple device called the King Road Drag, named after a Missouri farmer, D. Ward King. The device consisted of a split log one half fastened solidly about three feet ahead of the other. When pulled over a road after a heavy rain it smoothed the road and rounded or elevated it toward the center so that water would drain during the summer. The device was so inexpensive that every farmer could have one.

The logs extended from one edge of the road to the center of the road. They were fastened to the horses so that they were pulled and drug over the road not crosswise of the road but at an angle. The high places on the road were moved over to the low places. The dirt slid along the logs from the edge of the road toward the center. This elevated the center of the road and gave it good drainage.

An invention which helped to improve roads was the mall steel road grader which was usually pulled by horses. This device consisted of a framework on four wheels. Between the four wheels and at a very low location there was a large steel blade or a huge knife or scraper about the size of a steel blade on a modern snow shovel or on the front end of a modern truck adapted to the removal of snow. The road grader blade was sharp on the bottom edge and curved slightly upward. Two men who stood on a platform to the rear of the steel frame could manipulate the blade by turning wheels in front of them which in turn moved levers and steel cables attached to the huge blade or steel scraper.

The blade was not set or positioned directly across the road but slanted so that the blade end on the outside of the road was in a forward position. The end of the blade was lowered so that it would dig and scrape into the earth. The backward slant of the blade caused the earth or loosened dirt to slide along the blade until it was deposited at the other end which was at or near the middle of the road.

The middle of the road in this manner built up to a higher level than the sides or edges of the road. Thus roads had a gentle slope and good drainage. No longer was it necessary to fill the holes in the road by hand using hoes and shovels. The roads were improved with this road grader but they continued to be muddy in very wet weather and dusty during the dry summer weather.

There were now fewer mud holes. Fewer farmers had their wagons stuck in the mud. Fewer extra teams of horses had to be brought in to pull the wagons out of the mud road holes. Since the all steel road grader made ditches to the side of the road and built up the center of the road to a considerable elevation, there was good water drainage. This meant that the road was muddy fewer days of the year. Farmers could go to town more days of the year with less worry about getting stuck in the mud. Farmers could work fewer days on the road than formerly and have a better road than when they depended on hand tools for road repairs.

The adoption or introduction or rural free mail delivery increased the demand for improved roads. The use of the bicycle and the automobile also created the demand for better made. Attitudes towards roads soon changed. The knowledge of how to build good roads increased rapidly. Soon there was a great demand for hard surfaced, interstate and transcontinental highways. Before the era of the hard surfaced road there was the gravel road which made a road possible all through the year if snow drifts and snow did not pile up too deep.

Trees Helped People to Keep Cool

The spring house as a small house with one small room built to keep food cool. The floor of the house was tightly packed dirt a few inches below the surface of the surrounding area. There were double wooden walls to the house. The space between the walls, about three or four inches wide was filled with sawdust which resulted when wood was cut with a steel saw. The wood and sawdust provided insulation from the hot outside summer temperatures.

Extending through the spring house about two feet from the floor was a wooden trough. One end of the trough ended outside the building at the edge of the well. The opposite end of the trough ended a few inches beyond the building to a trough carved out of a tree trunk. Cold water from the well was poured into the trough near the well. The cool water flowed through the spring house through to the trough where horses and cows came to drink.

Some cross cleats or pieces of wood were nailed to the bottom of the trough to dam or obstruct the flow of cool well water to the watering trough. In like manner some cool well water was always kept around the food containers in the trough to keep the food cool. The cool temperature decreased the rate of multiplication of bacteria and kept the milk from spoiling and becoming sour and unfit for use.

Ice was cut from ponds during the very cold weather. It was moved to an ice house on a large wooden sled where the ice was stored until it could be sold the following summer.

The ice house had double wooden walls between which there was sawdust the insulating material secured from trees when they were sawed into lumber.

Thus the trees were essential in the collection and preservation of ice. It was a great treat for farmers and others when they could secure some ice for making ice cream and for making cold lemonade, ice tea and even just plain cold water.

During the 1920's some people could afford a wooden box in which ice was kept in one compartment. There was a small pipe extending from the ice compartment to a pan below or beneath the ice box. Water from the melting ice ran into the pan. If one did not keep the water in the pan emptied the water spilled over on the kitchen floor. This would cause the floor boards to warp. Ice melted fast. One had to be alert to keep the water pan emptied. The farmer had to make frequent trips to town to purchase ice to keep the ice chest filled with ice. There was little rest or comfort for the weary on the typical farm during the early years of the 20th century. Much time and effort were required to keep food cool so that it would not spoil. Ice cream, cold water, ice tea, and ice cold lemonade were very refreshing and very much in demand. Ice cream parlors in cities and towns served nothing but ice cream and they were well patronized.

Fun and Pleasure in the Shade of the Trees

The Old Settlers Picnic which took place for three days each year during the third week in August in a grove of trees adjacent to the town of Odon, Indiana was the largest and most important picnic in southern Indiana. Odon, Indiana was a small town of only a few hundred people. The nearby town of Washington, Indiana had a population of about 10,000 and many towns in the area were larger than Odon, Indiana. Why was such an important picnic held in Odon?

Odon owned a large beautiful forested area adjacent to the southern edge of town. The trees were spaced close enough to one another so that their foliage produced a cool dense almost continuous shade. Without the beautiful trees and the shade which they produced there would have been no picnic at Odon. People would have been sunburned without the shade of the trees. People could not have endured the August heat without the trees. The area of trees was large enough to accommodate the crowd.

The area of trees was not so large as to permit the people to scatter out and to become dispersed or fragmented. The closeness of the people to one another physically contributed to the social mixing and the friendly spirit or attitude toward one another.

The area of forest gave shade or partial shade to many of the horses, buggies and wagons which were parked around the margins of the forested area.

The town park at Odon, Indiana had a dense stand of large trees providing much shade and cool air during the hot summer days. This cool shady place was selected as the place to have the event called the "Old Settlers Picnic" which was scheduled yearly on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday during the third week in August.

Farm families traveled to the picnic in wagons and buggies made of wood and steel. The food that they brought with them to eat for the noon meal had been cooked at home in an iron cook stove with either wood or coal to supply the heat for cooking. At noon table cloths were spread on the ground and the prepared food was unpacked from baskets. Some adults and children sat on the ground in the shade of the trees and ate.

Some people patronized the lunch counters where the food was served on a long slender board at reasonable prices. While eating food one could listen to the beautiful music which was produced at the Merry Go Round where both adults and children rode around and around while they sat on wooden seats or rode on small wooden horses which moved up and down as the circular platform went around and around.

In the shade of the trees there was a platform with a wooden floor held up about two feet from the ground by wooden posts. The platform floor was somewhat like a stage in a theater or school but it was not called a stage. It was called "The Bandstand" because the band occupied the area when band concerts were given. Speakers who talked on various subjects stood there and shouted at the audience trying valiantly to hold the attention of all the people.

Some people chewed gum which originated from the sap of the tree which grew in South America. Others smoked cigarettes the tips of which contained cork which originated from the bark of a tree which grew in far away places such as Spain or Portugal in Europe or in North African countries.

The people in the audience wore wooden heels on their shoes. Some wooden heels were tipped with rubber heels which came from a tree which grew in the

Amazon River area in South America. The leather in the shoes had been made flexible and comfortable by a process called tanning. This process involved the use of hemlock bark from the hemlock tree.

People did not know that their lives were so much involved with trees. None of the speakers ever gave the audience any information about trees.

Since the business district of Odon was only two or three blocks distant from the picnic area it was convenient for the people at the picnic to do shopping for many needed items before or after attending the picnic.

The merchants of Odon advertised the picnic, offered prizes for the oldest lady in attendance and the most beautiful baby and did many other things to encourage attendance. The forested area adjacent to town was a great stimulus to business. After the picnic days were over the forested area continued to bring many people to town and to stimulate business. Many family reunions were held in the park. This brought people to Odon from far away places.

The importance of the forested park area was diminished by air conditioning. People no longer go to the park to enjoy the coolness. Meetings such as family reunions and other social events are now held in air conditioned auditoriums, gymnasiums and restaurants and cafeterias.

The Demise of the Odon Picnic

After a few years into the twentieth century the scientific developments made it possible to reduce the summer time heat in the kitchen and in the entire house. The kerosene cook stove was considered a great improvement in the method of cooking. It required less space than the old iron stove with the large flat top which gave off so much heat. The wood and coal were bulky and the flames from them could not completely be controlled. Flames would spread out and give off heat which heated the entire kitchen. The kerosene being liquid could produce a lot of heat from a small quantity of kerosene. The flame produced could be directed to a small area and could be regulated or controlled. No hot stove pipe was required. The introduction of the gas stove also made it possible to cook food without wasting so much heat.

No longer did people feel the urge to escape from the kitchen to the porch and swing back and forth to cool off. No longer did they have the urge to sit under a tree in the shade. The new automobile made it possible to cool off a bit by taking a ride through the rural areas. The electric fan helped to keep the house cool. The ice box and the electric refrigerator made it possible to preserve food and keep it cool. With the introduction of the tractor, the shade trees were not needed as resting places for horses.

The introduction of mechanical refrigeration, radio, television, air conditioning, telephone and automobile caused the Odon, Indiana picnic to undergo great changes. People did not need to go the picnic to see their friends. They could use the automobile at any time to visit friends in distant places. The shade of the trees in Odon could not compete with modern air conditioning nor did the entertainment there equal that which could be secured at home with television. The audience at the picnic during the day time dwindled to practically nothing. The cool night temperatures and electric lights encouraged the people to attend the picnic at night. The friendly people in large day time crowds have completely disappeared. The commercial aspect of the picnic has become dominant. One may have what is now called a good time at the present night time picnic but one must pay several dollars to achieve what seems to be very temporary artificial happiness. To many the present day picnic is considered to be both a waste of time and money. Gone forever are the firm handshakes, the friendly greetings, and the joy of conversing leisurely and at length with friends in the shade of the trees. All this is now done elsewhere at various times and places all during the year.

Renewed Appreciation of Trees

After most of the forested areas had been cleared for farming after agriculture had been introduced, and after towns and cities had been built, people began to miss the trees and the forests. Usually the people of a town would buy a remnant of a forest adjacent or nearby and preserve the trees. This area was called the city or town park. In this park both town and country people met and enjoyed the beauty and the shade of the trees while visiting with one another. They scheduled several social events and attractions among the trees, one of which was the Saturday night or Sunday afternoon band concert.

In many city or town parks people are permitted to build fires. Nearby wood from fallen tree limbs is available for fuel. Wieners and other kinds of food can be cooked over an outdoor fire and passed out to all in the party. While food is being prepared children use the playground equipment, some of which is made of wood. Nearby there are usually picnic shelters made of trees where people can retreat in case of rain or a sudden thunderstorm.

Some families prepared their food at home and transported it to the park in baskets made of thin strips of wood. The food was placed on a wooden table. People ate the food while sitting on wooden benches. Some of the food eaten was probably derived from trees. On a hot day the moveable wooden table was placed in the shade of a tree. People knew that the shade of a tree makes them more comfortable but some did not know that the shade of the tree protected them from having skin cancer.

Forests are valuable assets to the people of modern cities who often depend on forested water sheds for their drinking water. More than half of New York City’s water supply comes from reservoirs in the forested Catskill Mountains. Without forests there would be more silt in the water and greater fluctuations in the stores of water in the reservoirs. Therefore there would be more water shortages. People of New York and other cities do not want clear cutting of trees because it would result in increased silt in the reservoir areas. They do not want campers, hunters and other visitors in the forested areas because of the danger of water contamination and increased danger of forest fires. Forest fires would reduce the quantity and quality of their water supply.

Forests are important regulators of our very important water supplies. Without this important function of forests people have too much water or not enough water. Either is costly and undesirable.

Donald Keller

Donald Keller grew up on an Indiana farm near Epsom.

As a young man he studied history at Indiana State University (then Indiana Normal School) earning a B.S. degree. Then he earned a Masters degree in geography at Clark University.

He married Frances Dubbs and had one daughter, Barbara.

His teaching experience included 15 years in elementary school, 4 years in high school and 22 years in college. His classes were popular because he never stopped learning, made things interesting and had a contagious sense of humor.

His passion for the environment probably began while he was living on an early 20th century farm. It then continued in his teaching. His wish was that people would learn about the environment and take action in protecting it.